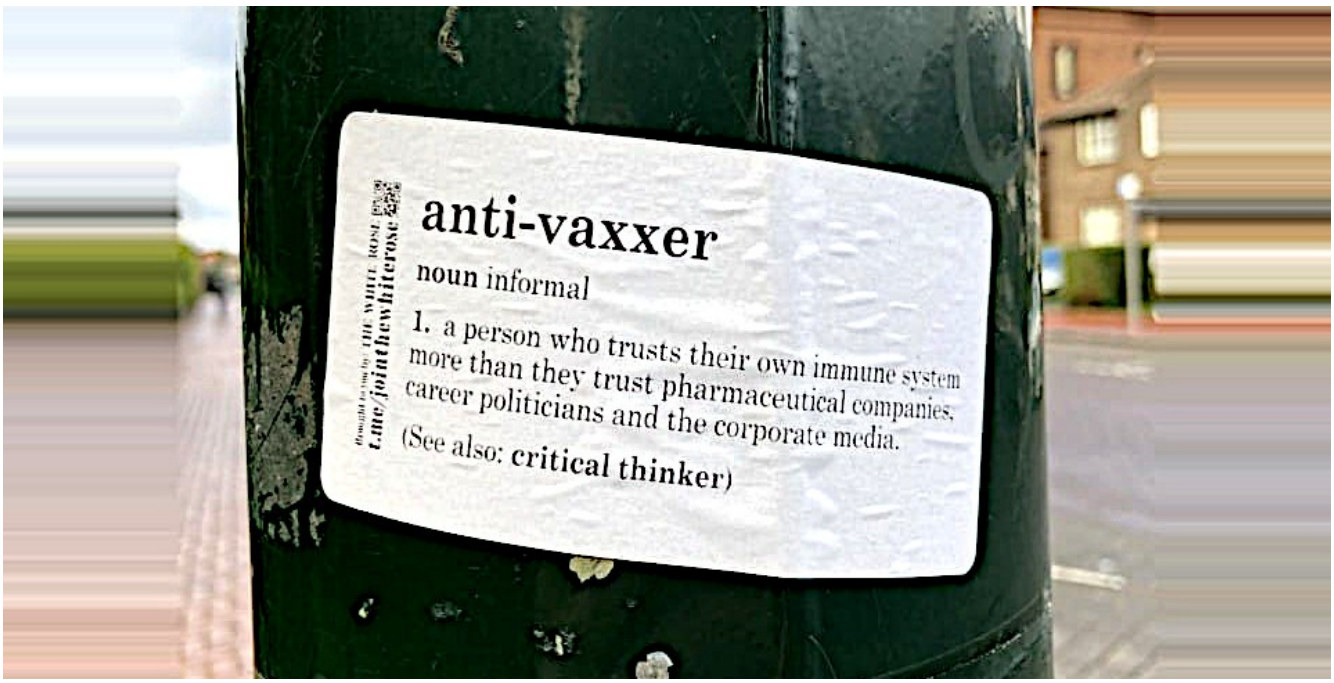
Conspiracism and demarcation


anti-vaxxer
noun informal
1. a person who trusts their own immune system more than they trust pharmaceutical companies, career politicians and the corporate media.
(See also: critical thinker)

...or the tendency to believe in a conspiracy as an explanation for some (usually undesirable) social phenomenon. A conspiracy is usually defined as a belief or set of beliefs promulgated by a small group of persons with nefarious motives, but we will take a closer look at the concept.

Sometimes I don't know where the bullshit ends and the truth begins.

– Joe Gideon in *All that Jazz*

...the demarcation problem...

– Karl Popper

Navigating the bullshit storm

We are going to work toward spelling out criteria for evaluating supposed conspiracy theories. Can a conspiracy theory be true? Yes. Can what it is opposed to, the "official" theory, be a conspiracy, too – or instead? Yes and yes. What are we to believe? How can we tell if a conspiracy is well-founded? In some cases, it is easy. In others, *the most philosophically interesting cases*, not. We will explore why this is.

Some explanations seem harebrained, and we are in our right mind to dismiss them without too much consideration. But many established explanations, ones we mostly take for granted now, were once deemed harebrained, too. It is hard to keep that in mind sometimes. We don't have all the time and resources in the universe to expend on investigating to the hilt every proposal. We are compelled to do epistemic triage: sort the plausible from the patently harebrained. Life can seem to be an emergency…

this is why conspiracies are a problem, and why we should arm ourselves with methods to deal with them. But in the end, there are no simple tests. Just things to be aware of.

Though the initial number of promulgators of a conspiracy theory must be *small* (otherwise, it is a movement and can hardly be kept secret), the number of believers in the theory may be very large. The promulgators must also *intend* to convey what is false (for it to remain a "conspiracy" and not an epistemic disagreement), otherwise they are not true conspirators but mistaken believers. However, the believers themselves may be many and sincere in their belief – and, often enough, disturbingly *correct* in their belief.

Thus,

- the number conspirators must be *small* relative to the audience they intend to deceive,
- though the number of believers *may be very large*,
- the conspirators must be *aware of the falseness or unlikelihood* of their theory,
- while the believers need *not* be,
- the motivations of the conspirators must be *dishonest* and not just careless, and
- the most dangerous and effective conspiracies are the products of persons *empowered* to promulgate

Conspiracies usually dissipate with increased understanding[1] of the states of affairs they purport to describe. They are either replaced by more widely accepted understandings (true or not) or by other conspiracies or narratives – yet to be labeled "conspiracies."

The topic falls within the sub branch of philosophy called *doxastics*, philosophical questions around "belief." Doxastics is a branch of *epistemology*, the general study of knowledge, what it is and how it works. It also crosses into *ethics*, ideas about how we should interact with each other, since knowledge and belief can affect our actions.

Examples of conspiracies can range from the near ludicrous to the quite plausible, from why smoking was once touted a health benefit to Watergate, from Hilary Clinton's association with a ring of sex-traffickers operating out of a pizza parlor, which some connected with a child slave colony of Mars, to the true cause of and so-called "science" involved in the recent pandemic; from whether Elvis is still alive or who killed Kennedy or who is responsible for 9/11, or to why Jeffery Epstein's alleged "client list" has not been made public.

A conspiracy can be vast and pervasive – practically *global*, because there are gradations of awareness. Large numbers of people may be dimly aware that the United States, for example, is a democracy "in name only," yet still go to the polls "believing" their vote matters. Conspiracies may be *local* and targeted at certain individuals or small groups. To "gaslight," as in the classic movie of that name, can focus on making as few as *one* person feel they are losing their mind.

1. "Increased understanding" does *not* mean, without argument, "closer to the truth." It is safer to say it means "more sophistication, more information…" "Closer" implies there is *finite* distance between where we are epistemically and the spatial coordinates of a *place* called "truth." We are bewitched by spatial metaphors, Wittgenstein would say. There is no reason to believe there is not an *infinity* between what we may learn and the endpoint of learning.

To the extent one's own motives are disingenuousness, or we are barely aware of them, or seek to suppress them, it seems one may "conspire" even against oneself. But here we will address conspiracy as a *social* phenomena. *Certain societal background conditions make appeal to conspiracy especially tempting. At the top of the list is loss of trust in social institutions.* How does that happen?

Demarcation

Karl Popper, in the early 1960s, famously proposed criteria for sorting *science* from *pseudo-science*, theories that do not adhere to received methods that define science. When speculation, untestable hypotheses, and subjective impressions want to sport the label "science," this he wanted to call "pseudo-science." Popper had in mind especially Freudian psychoanalysis and some Marxist theories of history as paradigm cases of pseudo-science. Whatever truthful or useful insights result from these theories, they are not "sciences," they border on astrology and homeopathic medicine. Again, a pseudo-science is not *necessarily* incorrect or a waste of time, it's just not science. Popper proposed as a test of sciencehood whether a theory could make predictions: if the predictions failed, then the theory that generated them was falsified.[2]

Popper's theory of falsification was influential and garnered a lot of attention in the philosophy of science – much of it since quite critical. How human knowledge progresses is more complicated than he imagined. Nevertheless, falsificationism remains the gold standard, if there is one, in certain areas of science, allopathic medicine, for example. Randomized controlled trials are touted as the best way to settle the question of the effectiveness of a drug or treatment. If a remedy tested this way is significantly effective, then it has *at least* not been falsified – *yet*. It's important to note that *real* scientific explanations, hypotheses and theories must *always* be open to being tested and retested. What passes a test today, may not tomorrow. Revisionism is built into any genuine scientific method. This is because the ideal is *reliable* information – as close to truth as we may get. And if the stakes are high, as in one's physical or mental health, the drive to achieve epistemic intimacy with "truth" is urgent.

But the stakes can be high in many other areas of experience such as in collective decisions with major social consequences. What we believe, the explanations we accept, the authorities we recognize, effect decisions, and decisions can effect the quality of lives and even life itself. So if one proposes an explanation for a phenomenon with grave consequences, something we should do something about on pain of suffering them, we need to evaluate the explanation. If there are competing explanations, we need to decide between them. *How?*

Some explanations are labeled "conspiracies." Others are labeled "official" or widely accepted. It is *usually* an epistemic "best practice" to adhere to the "official" or received explanations. These are *usually* propounded by those qualified to judge in the relevant area of concern. "Conspiracy," in popular usage, carries with it dismissive connotations. A "conspiracy" can be epistemically defective

2. Professor Jiang Xueqin's "Predictive history" program would be another paradigm case. Informed and critical observation is at the heart of human progress in every field. In the philosophy of science, there is a distinction between "observational" or retrospective studies, on the one hand, and prospective or experimental methods (e.g., randomized controlled trials), on the other. The former are emblematic of historical analysis, but this method falls afoul of Popper's criteria. Lessons from history sometimes fail to predict. Does its predictive limitations mean we cannot learn from history? Are the rigorous methods characteristic of some of the hard sciences the *only* way or even the *best* way to augment understanding of experience? Does Xueqin's "psychohistorical" project have epistemic value? See, e.g., his lecture "Secret History #4: How Evil Triumphs." What about when mathematically precise methods fail to predict – such as Ptolemy's model of the motions of lights in the night sky? Is "rigor" a guarantee of "correctness"?

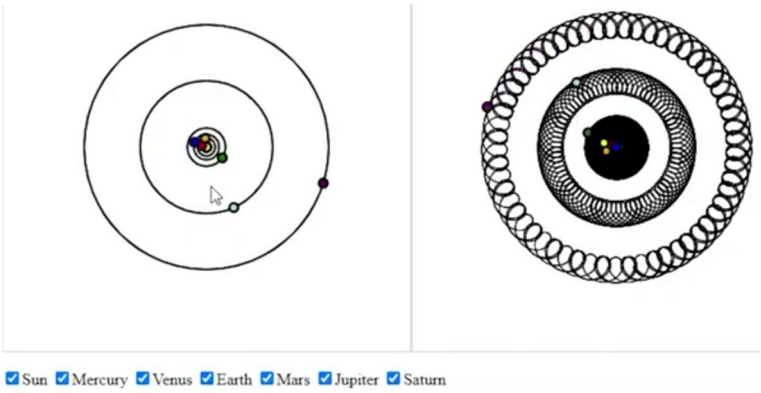
because not many people believe it, or the ones that do are not qualified to judge it, or they are motivated by non-epistemic, "ulterior" motives, or the believers are willfully ignorant, etc. One more thing: if the promulgators are in positions of communicative *power,* the stakes are magnified.[3]

Why "usually" and not "always"? Because official theories by recognized authorities are *empowered* promulgators almost by definition. Unless the principles of the promulgators override every predictable pressure humans are subject to, their theories, too, are compromised – especially and dangerously so by their empowered status.

...

As with demarcation tests in science, is there a simple method for identifying when an explanation is conspiratorial and when we ought to take it seriously? *In the cases that matter most, there isn't.*

Almost all scientifically fruitful explanations we accept now were classed as wrong-headed or conspiratorial when first proposed (and some for a very long time after): the heliocentric theory of why lights in the night sky move the way do, the theory of plate tectonics, proto-theories of what we now call "hormones," that the earth is not flat, what killed off the dinosaurs, etc… If someone says, "but we know better now, we cannot be fooled again," they know little of the history of science.



heliocentrism vs. geocentrism

Social "conspiracies" are even more subject to premature dismissal.

There is an ambiguity in the usage of the term "conspiracy." It may mean:

- The explanation has been *rationally evaluated* and duly found wanting in support or credibility, or
- we are occupied by other things and *feel compelled to rely* on the judgment of real or supposed authorities, such as politicians, media, or people presenting as authorities whose qualifications we cannot scrutinize, again, because of our preoccupation. The reality is we must be excused for the preoccupation: we have lives to live and the world is complicated. We *must* rely on others who are in a better position to know when an explanation is, or is not, a conspiracy.

Excusable or not, the second reason for dismissal is not the same as the first. The first is a *reasoned assessment*; the second, an *excuse*. This is where philosophical analysis parts company with popular views on what counts as a conspiracy. Philosophers are in the business of mulling things over; they are licensed to waste time. An excuse, if it is ever sufficient for them, is a last resort.

3. Backed by *concentrations of power*: governments, public and/or private, in Elizabeth Anderson's sense.

Generalist *versus* particularist evaluation of conspiracy

Popper's was a *generalist* understanding of conspiracy. He seemed to think that if we call it a "conspiracy," this implies it is incorrect by definition, taking science to exclude the negative connotations associated with the term. Real science wants to separate itself from woo-woo. In genuine science, there are rules. Not following those rules, rules out a candidate explanation as far as science is concerned. That an explanation may be correct, or reflect reality is some valuable sense, though it is derived via an extra-scientific, still observational, method is, nevertheless, a strike against it.

The *particularist* view of conspiracy steps back and seeks to judge conspiracies more neutrally. Alternatives to official explanations are candidates for scrutiny and should be assessed for truth value on a *case by case* basis. A conspiracy, then, is just a theory, like any other, waiting to be evaluated for credibility: innocent of falseness until shown otherwise.

Criteria for labeling conspiracies and conspirators:

Minimally, it's been proposed, a conspiracy must involve:

- a small[4] group acting in *secret.*

But this can't be enough: think of organizers of a surprise birthday party... Then, we may add, conspirators must also:

- be *powerful*
- and have *nefarious* motives.

Powerful because weak conspiracies pose little threat. *Nefarious* because we want to capture an element of threat to a correct or useful picture of the world. Is that enough?

Who decides what is "nefarious" or ill-intentioned?[5] Is it nefarious because it is a threat to an "official" theory? A conspiracy opposes an "official" theory. What is the relation between being official and being correct? Power is also associated with being "official"; how did a theory get to be "official" in the first

4. Why is *smallness* important? Actually, it is not essential, there is such a thing as mass hallucination, most recently in the form of mass formation psychosis. If it is massive enough, if we are all in on it, like belief in a world external to our senses, which only certain philosophers are inclined to doubt, then it's likely to go unrevealed as such. Is a falsehood that is *never* detected, even in principle, still a lie? As a practical matter, it's just harder to maintain secrecy the more conspirators involved. Masses tend to be believers, as opposed to *intentional* promulgators. Masses accrete around *plausible* beliefs – not "true" ones. They wouldn't know a true one if it bit them. And if it literally *bit* them, they would not engage in epistemic argumentation. Plausibility is the most we can epistemically wrangle. But plausibility is vague... and life short.

5. The instigators of the American Revolution were a bunch political opportunists trading in lies about how they were unfairly taxed by the British, according to philosopher Jeremy Bentham. At the time, the average British citizen paid more taxes to the Crown than the average American colonist, and they weren't using that as an excuse to rebel. The "no taxation without representation" slogan was pure propaganda based on the false belief in natural or God-given rights to being consulted on ethical matters. "Rights" to this or the other, Bentham famously asserted, were "nonsense of stilts." The *rational* distribution of societal burdens could only follow from what was most conducive to the greatest well-being of the greatest number of its members. The principle here was later dubbed "utilitarianism" by J. S. Mill. Violating your quasi-supernatural rights is, for a materialist/hedonist like Bentham, a lame rationalization to buttress an argument for rebelling against established order.

place otherwise? It should get our attention when two or more theories each exert some non-negligible power to convince.

Originally, the term “conspiracy” suggested often an alternative explanation or perspective, and did not automatically imply an epistemic deficit (lack truth value). The term has increasingly become a loaded accusation, suggesting dismissal without further consideration.

Trends “conspiracism,” the term

> Muirhead and Rosenblum (2019) have used it to describe an evolving phenomenon of political culture, distinguishing *classic conspiracism* from *new conspiracism*. While classic conspiracism involves the development of conspiracy theories as alternative explanations of phenomena, new conspiracism has shed the interest in explanation and theory building. Instead, it is satisfied with bare assertion or insinuation of a conspiracy and aims at political delegitimation and destabilization.[6]

Lakatosian “degenerating research programs”

> Clarke (2002 and 2007) thinks that some conspiracy theories are actually only proto-theories, not worked out sufficiently to count as theories, while others may be degenerating research programs in the sense defined by Imre Lakatos... here it is important to realize that while all conspiracy theories are explanations of some sort, certain conspiracy theories may be theories, others may be proto-theories or research programs.[7]

See below for more on the *degenerate* and *progressive* research programs. The distinction is akin to Thomas Kuhn’s distinction between normal and revolutionary science.[8]

Types of criteria for evaluating conspiracy

In scrutinizing a conspiracy theory we may have at least one of three motivations. Our scrutiny may be:

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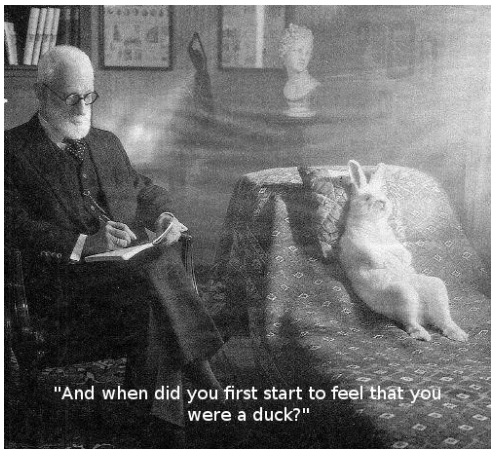
6. Pauly, see Resources.
7. Pauly, *ibid.*
8. From the *SEP* on Kuhn, “According to Kuhn the development of a science is not uniform but has alternating ‘normal’ and ‘revolutionary’ (or ‘extraordinary’) phases. The revolutionary phases are not merely periods of accelerated progress, but differ qualitatively from normal science. Normal science does resemble the standard cumulative picture of scientific progress, on the surface at least. Kuhn describes normal science as ‘puzzle-solving’ (1962/1970a, 35–42). While this term suggests that normal science is not dramatic, its main purpose is to convey the idea that like someone doing a crossword puzzle or a chess problem or a jigsaw, the puzzle-solver expects to have a reasonable chance of solving the puzzle, that his doing so will depend mainly on his own ability, and that the puzzle itself and its methods of solution will have a high degree of familiarity. A puzzle-solver is not entering completely uncharted territory. Because its puzzles and their solutions are familiar and relatively straightforward, normal science can expect to accumulate a growing stock of puzzle-solutions. Revolutionary science, however, is not cumulative in that, according to Kuhn, scientific revolutions involve a revision to existing scientific belief or practice (1962/1970a, 92). Not all the achievements of the preceding period of normal science are preserved in a revolution, and indeed a later period of science may find itself without an explanation for a phenomenon that in an earlier period was held to be successfully explained. This feature of scientific revolutions has become known as ‘Kuhn-loss’ (1962/1970a, 99–100).”

- **realist** – aiming at *truth*, or
- **instrumentalist (nonrealist)** – aiming to achieve *usefulness*, e.g., making predictions; may include truth as a means and hence has some epistemic motivation, but the main thing is utility, or
- **pragmatic (nonrealist)** – concerned with *consequences*, "truth" is academic and a potential distraction; the political or social consequences of holding a belief are paramount.

Realist criteria

- **Internal faults –** Basham: "problems with self-consistency, explanatory gaps, appeals to unlikely or obviously weak motives and other unrealistic psychological states, poor technological claims, and the theory's own incongruencies with observed facts it grants (including failed predictions)." An historical example he mentions is the theory that sees the antichrist of the biblical Book of Revelations to be Adolf Hitler. According to Basham, the fact that Hitler is dead and the kingdom of God nowhere near shows that this theory has internal faults, presumably a big explanatory gap or failed prediction.

- **Can a conspiracy be a *progressive* research program? –** in a *degenerating* research program, "successful novel predictions and retrodictions are not made. Instead, auxiliary hypotheses and initial conditions are successively modified in light of new evidence, to protect the original theory from apparent disconfirmation."[9] In contrast, a *progressive* one is open to alternative ways of looking at things when received ones start to fail to explain without increasingly *ad hoc* adjustments. If it looks like a duck, quacks like a duck… at a certain point, one starts to suspect it is *not* a rabbit in disguise.



- **Abduction or inference to the best explanation –** "...we tend to underestimate how often conspiracies occur in history." We want to believe in "official" theories, that there are responsible people in charge of institutions that propose them. But it is one thing to admit we *need* to believe and it is another to believe this need justifies a given belief.[10] Conspiracists are

9. Clarke, S. (2002). "Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 32(2), 131-150.

10. I do not dismiss believers in God merely because of their vulnerability to doxastic speech or thought – nor, for that matter, atheists for theirs (yes, believing God does *not* exist still involves "belief"). To the extent we realize we are animals, to that extent we should have some grasp of how it's possible to operate *without* propositional beliefs. Believing is not functionally necessary for living. A cat does not "believe" anything about the metaphysical status, or epistemic validation of the perception it has of the mouse it stalks. Belief, in the epistemic sense, is *not* necessary for action. For epistemically dependent – in this way, *crippled* – humans, for whom a *genuine* grip on epistemic neutrality may be untenable, what's possible may be different. They *should*, nevertheless, as Wittgenstein suggested, keep mum… if they can. If they can't operate without beliefs, they ought, to be consistent, cut all beliefs equally the same initial slack. Or direct major effort to explaining why... (The epistemics around theism and atheism will be an upcoming future

often accused of being *selective* in the evidence they adduce, but exactly the same happens in normal scientific theory validation.[11] All theory validation is *necessarily* selective. It's not *whether* a theory's support is selective, but about *how bravely it strives not to be, how much it courts being shown wrong by inviting consideration of dissenting evidence or authority.*

- **Errant data –** one of the common claims of conspiracies is that they can explain facts the official theories can't or don't. "Many conspiracy theories claim that they can explain "errant data" (Keeley, 1999, p.117), data which either contradicts the official theory or which the official theory leaves unexplained. According to Keeley (1999), conspiracy theories place great emphasis on errant data, an emphasis that also exists in periods of scientific innovation. However, Keeley thinks that conspiracy theories wrongly claim that errant data by itself is a problem for a theory, which Keeley thinks it is not, since not all the available data will in fact be true. Clarke (2002 p.139f) and Dentith (2019, section 3) are skeptical of Keeley's argument: Clarke points out that the data labelled as 'errant' will depend on the theory one adheres to, and Dentith thinks that conspiracy theories are no different from other theories in relation to such data." Both conspiracy and official theories have *equally* to address errant data: "As an example of data errant with regard to the official theory, Dentith mentions that the official theory about the assassination of John F. Kennedy does not explain why some witnesses heard more gunshots than the three gunshots Oswald is supposed to have fired. As an example of data errant with regard to a conspiracy theory, Dentith points out that some of the conspiracy theories about 9/11 cannot explain why there is a video of Osama Bin Laden claiming responsibility for the attacks. When it comes to evaluating a specific conspiracy theory, the conclusion is that we should be looking at the errant data of both the conspiracy theory and alternative theories."[12]

- **Motives –** who *benefits* from a theory being true? A theory of either kind should be clear as to motives: "If the goals of the conspirators are not explicitly part of the theory, we should be able to infer these goals, and they should be reasonable. Problematic conspiracy theories are those where the motives or goals of the conspirators are unclear, the goals ascribed to the conspirators conflict with our other knowledge about the goals of these agents, or a successful conspiracy would not further the goals the theory itself ascribes to the conspirators." Money/power/status are common and incriminating motives. What killed off the dinosaurs? If your career was built on bolstering the theory that an asteroid did, as that of many paleo-geologist were for decades, evidence that a massive geothermal event could just as well have done it might lead you to cast aspersions on one who points this out. For decades, Princeton geologist Gerta Keller was targeted for abuse by her scientific colleagues for suggesting such. She was called a "bitch" and "the most dangerous woman in the world," who "should be stoned and burned at the stake." The wealth of Dr. Anthony Fauci, head of the CDC, augmented handsomely during the recent

topic: why are so many *compelled* to have belief one or the other about the reality of a supernatural entity? Especially, since the rest of the animate existence seems to have no problem with survival *in the absence* of belief? Are we admitting we can't function as well at living or existence as a fungi with no detectable belief system whatever?)

11. Dentith, M. (2019). "Conspiracy theories on the basis of the evidence," *Synthese*, vol. 196, no. 6, p.2243-2261.
12. Pauly, *ibid.*

pandemic, but, of course, that doesn't prove anything… Still, eyebrows might be forgiven for elevating. "If a person working for the fossil-fuel industry claims that there is a global conspiracy propagating the idea of global warming, the financial motive is clear. Conversely, people who reject a particular theory as 'just' a conspiracy theory may also have a motive to mislead. As an example, Pidgen discusses the case of Tony Blair, who labeled the idea that the Iraq war was fought for oil a mere conspiracy theory."[13]

- **Trust authority –** *which* and *why?* "According to Levy, the best epistemic strategy is simply to 'adjust one's degree of belief in an explanation of an event or process to the degree to which the epistemic authorities accept that explanation' (p.190). Dentith (2018) criticizes Levy's trust in epistemic authority. First, Dentith argues that since conspiracy theories cross disciplinary boundaries, there is no obvious group of experts when it comes to evaluating a conspiracy theory, since a conspiracy theory will usually involve claims connecting various disciplines. Furthermore, Dentith points out that the fact that a theory has authority in the sense of being official does not necessarily mean that it has epistemic authority, a point Levy also makes. Related to our first point about trust, Dentith also points out that epistemic authorities might have a motive to mislead, for example, when the funding sources might have influenced research. Finally, our trust in epistemic authority will also depend on the trust we place in the institutions accrediting expertise, and hence questions of individual trustworthiness relate to questions of institutional trustworthiness."

- **Institutional trust –** this is where *conspiracy as a symptom* gets serious. Here I quote Pauly at length: "As mentioned when discussing individual trust, when we want to assess the credibility of experts, part of that credibility judgment will depend on the extent to which we trust the institution accrediting the expertise, assuming there is such an institution to which the expert is linked...

  "The starting point of the discussion of institutional trust is Keeley (1999, p.121ff) who argues that the problem with conspiracy theories is that these theories cast doubt on precisely those institutions which are the guarantors of reliable data. If a conspiracy theory contradicts an official theory based on scientific expertise, this produces skepticism not only with regard to the institution of science, but may also produce skepticism with regard to other public institutions, for example the press, which accepts the official story instead of uncovering the conspiracy, the parliament and the government, which produce or propagate the conspiracy theory in the first place. Thus, the claim is that believing in a conspiracy theory implies a quite widespread distrust of our public institutions. If this implication is true, it can be used in two ways: Either to discredit the conspiracy theory, which is the route Keeley advocates, or to discredit our public institutions. In any case, our trust in our public institutions will influence the extent to which we hold a particular conspiracy theory to be likely. For this reason, both Keeley (1999, p.121ff) and

13. Pauly, *ibid.*

Coady (2006a, p.10) think that conspiracy theories are more trustworthy in non-democratic societies. ” **[And if society – like that in the U.S. now, which has been certified as *non-democratic* (according to political scientist Martin Gilens, *et al.*) – is crawling with conspiracy theories, then what?…]**

Instrumentalist assessments of conspiracy theories

Maybe it doesn't matter whether the conspiracy theory is true if assuming it is, it permits accurate predictions and useful assessments.

- "Viewed this way, conspiracy theories are 'as-if'-theories which allow their adherents to make sense of a world that is causally opaque in a way that may often yield quite adequate predictions. 'An assumption that the government operated as if it were controlled by a parallel and secret government may fit the historical data…while also providing better predictions than would, say, an exercise motivated by an analysis of constitutional authority or the statutory limitations to executive power' (p.36). As a more concrete example, Grewal mentions that 'the most parsimonious way to understand financial decision making in the Eurozone might be to treat it as if it were run by and for the benefit of the Continent's richest private banks' (p.37). Hence, our evaluation of a given conspiracy theory will also depend on basic philosophical commitments like what we expect our theories to do for us."

Pragmatic considerations

- Basham (2001) claims that epistemic rejection of conspiracy theories will often not work, and we have to be agnostic about their truth. Still, we should reject them for pragmatic reasons because "[t]here is nothing you can do," given the impossibility of finding out the truth, and "[t]he futile pursuit of malevolent conspiracy theory sours and distracts us from what is good and valuable in life" (p.277). Similarly, Räikkä (2009a) says that "a person who strives for happiness in her personal life should not ponder on vicious conspiracies too much" (p.199). Then again, contrary to Basham's claim, what you *can* do with regard to conspiracy theories will depend on your role. As a journalist, you may decide to investigate certain claims, and Räikkä (2009a, p.199f) thinks that "it is important that in every country there are *some people* who are interested in investigative journalism and political conspiracy theorizing." **[Supposing oneself a philosopher and well acquainted with the inefficacy of exhortations to think straight about the world, still, one might see a role for oneself in documenting the truth of a matter (to the extent accessible) for posterity – even in the perhaps lame hope that one day this will bear constructive fruit, if not any time soon. For example, given the widespread and stubborn belief people in the U.S. still have regarding their nation: that it is an *actual* "democracy," – *empirical determinations by political scientists and the conceptual qualms of philosophers suggesting the contrary* – and the likely high cost of widespread upheaval and disruption to this entrenched belief by trying to disabuse these**

believers, it may be best to not press the point too hard. People will not likely believe you, first, and, second, if they do, subsequent distress may lead to deep and mass disillusionment rather constructive efforts at amelioration. Pressing the case and the enormity of its implications may do more harm than good, and perhaps that's too much to ask… It is indecent: like telling someone on their death bed that the world will be a better place when they are gone – *even if it's true*. (Our upcoming discussion of the film *Birth* will involve a situation similar to this.)]

Resources

- The *IEP* entry on "Conspiracy Theories" by Marc Pauly is a particularly good and accessible introduction to the philosophical thinking on this subject. Among other considerations, the article brings up the question, when has a "degenerating research program" – that is, a once "official," now obsolescing, desperate explanation – been mistaken for a conspiracy theory? Efforts to shore up established scientific thinking often share features with conspiracy theories. When does "established" become "sclerotic"? This transition *must* happen for progress in, or out of, science. In that transition, there is and ought to be ample room for "thinking outside the box." The big question: *how far outside the box?*

- "Philosophy and conspiracy theories," Mr Blakley offers a video survey of the philosophical controversies surrounding conspiracy theories: the trouble with defining a conspiracy, generalist vs particularist evaluations, the demarcation problem between dismissible and plausible theories and the similarity to that between science and pseudo-science.

- "The Covid 'lab leak' theory isn't just a rightwing conspiracy – pretending that's the case is bad for science," Jane Qiu, *The Guardian*, June 2025. Qiu looks at the question of who to believe about the origin of the Covid -19 pandemic.

- "The Interstellar Object 3I/ATLAS, Avi Loeb and Aliens," *Cool Worlds*, hosted by astronomer David Mathew Kipping. Is one of the world's top scientists, Avi Loeb, trading in conspiracy? This controversy illustrates how close science can get to what many would call "conspiracy," while still being legitimate science. Genuine scientific thinking *must* keep an open mind, but, again, *how* open? Till your brains fall out?

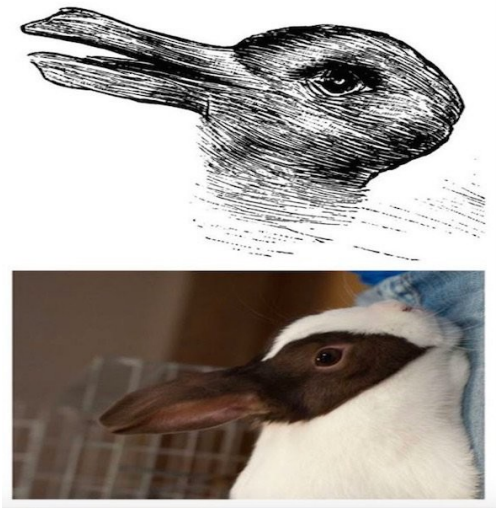
- "I can't believe this really happened," Sabine Hossenfelter has been calling out "bullshit" in the fields of theoretical physics and cosmology for a decade at least. She has been accused insinuating conspiracies in the hard sciences – a field in which *obscurity* can substitute for the *secrecy* attribute of conspiracy but leaving *power to publish* and unbecoming *motives* more or less intact. Her sometimes ungracious language has made her enemies. Her "bad girl" fierceness, admirers, too... She responds to the question of how so much bullshit can get published: "It's a lack of education in the philosophy of science in general. For example, the most commonly accepted story about the beginning of the universe is the big bang, and to some extent this is really just the simplest way you can extrapolate the equations into the past – and then you can add inflation, which is an exponential phase of expansion; or, like Roger Penrose, you can make it a cyclic universe. But maybe it was a big bounce, or it started with the collision

of membranes. These ideas are all possible – they're all compatible with the observations that we have. But I would call them ascientific – the kind of idea that evidence says nothing for nor against." "Also, it worries me that we always talk about how science supposedly self-corrects, but it doesn't seem to be happening. They're just trying the same thing over and over again." Quotes from a *Guardian* interview.

- "Naomi Wolf: 'Von der Leyen Lied About Pfizer Safety' – EU Parliament in Shock | APT" Liberal feminist journalist Naomi Wolf speaks before the European Parliament. The occasion for her alarming talk is the book she edited, *The Pfizer Papers: Pfizer's Crimes Against Humanity.* She is accused of being a conspiracist for exposing Pfizer's internal documents on the adverse effects of mRNA vaccines. Is well-documented concern for reproductive health, and health in general – *no matter where the political chips fall* – a conspiracy?

- Monsanto: "Exposing Why Farmers Can't Legally Replant Their Own Seeds," *Veritasium* Notice the fingerprints of "conspiracy": 1. *Secrecy*, i.e., lack of transparency, 2. *Nefarious* motives, and 3. *Power* to inform, or shape communication, i.e., subvert authority (science, academia, regulation, legislation, etc.). What does this do to public trust in institutions? Should we wonder at antivaxxers, et al.? Where does the bullshit end and the truth begin?

- "Dr Martin Kulldorff: The CDC lied about the vaccine," *UnHerd.* "Freddie Sayers speaks with Dr. Martin Kulldorff – co-author of the Great Barrington Declaration and newly appointed chair of the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) – to discuss his and Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s views on vaccines, the recent turmoil at the CDC that has seen senior officials resign or be removed, and his reflections on the global pandemic response, from Sweden's no-lockdown strategy to the United States' vaccine mandates..." The politicization of medical science during the pandemic damaged the credibility of health institutions. The untargeted use of poorly tested vaccines, disinformation as to their effectiveness, suppression of information about adverse effects, and liberal dispensation of EUAs (emergency use authorizations) – shielding from responsibility those who stood to gain handsomely at public expense all the while posing concern for public health – all instance again the most salient traits of conspiracy: secrecy, ulterior motives, and the power to steer public policy. The proper response would have been to be open about government gain-of-function research, take responsibility for mistakes in its implementation, separate pecuniary motives from public health policy, not censor expertise counter to a preferred narrative, insist on the highest standards of medical science which cannot be preserved under manufactured duress, etc…. and *demand the impossible* under an ostensibly "democratic" government: the *de-politicization* of science. Whether something is a duck or a rabbit ought not be a matter for politicians of any stripe to decide.



- In his podcast, "Is Science Objective? | The Philosophy of Science," Joe Folley offers an excellent overview on contemporary attitudes toward "truth" and "reality" in the philosophy of

science. Many of the same distinctions apply in evaluating conspiracies, especially those between realist and anti-realist/pragmatic orientations. Science is messier than Popper suggested. Squatting on a position entails being prepared to defend it... And if science is so messy with its pretensions to rigor, how much messier is everything that doesn't pretend to be science?

- "Premiere: Inside mRNA Vaccines," full length documentary on *artificial natural* medicines. Conspiracy or not, here they come… Nothing especially new to anyone following their development over the last few years, but the exposition is well organized, offering lots of fodder for suspicion.

Examples to consider:

mRNA vaccines

Health secretary RFK Jr. endorses the MMR vaccine — stoking fury among his supporters : Shots - Health News : NPR https://share.google/PlZxOdIVJ4wcZRGUv

RFK Jr.: HHS Moves to Restore Public Trust in Vaccines | HHS.gov https://share.google/oKOQkWMG9m5oN5qGv

Extended writeup for the topic hosted at The Philosophy Club in September 2025
Accessible at Archive.org

– Victor Muñoz
Guanajuato / Seattle